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Question & Answers

Agency Issues Plan for Reducing Caspian Terns' Consumption of Imperiled Salmon

Effort Would Benefit Salmon and Terns

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today released a plan for dispersing the world's largest colony of Caspian terns from the mouth of the Columbia River to seven alternate sites in Washington, Oregon and California.

Aimed at reducing the number of young salmon eaten by terns, the plan also will benefit the terns by redistributing a large breeding concentration that leaves the population vulnerable to disease, human disturbance, predation and storms. Currently, about 70 percent of the entire western population of Caspian terns in North America nests on East Sand Island in the Columbia River estuary.

The plan, "Caspian Tern Management to Reduce Predation of Juvenile Salmonids in the Columbia River Estuary: Final Environmental Impact Statement," was prepared in cooperation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and NOAA Fisheries, the federal agency responsible for recovering the 13 populations of salmon and steelhead in the Columbia River Basin that are listed under the Endangered Species Act as threatened or endangered. Studies over the past few years show that the terns have been eating large numbers of federally protected salmon and steelhead, with steelhead being most affected.

The plan calls for redistributing the tern population by creating or enhancing nesting habitat elsewhere in the Pacific Region and reducing nesting habitat on East Sand Island.

"Studies show that a two-thirds reduction in the tern concentration on East Sand Island could result in a 1 percent or greater increase in the growth rates of four populations of Columbia River Basin steelhead," said Dave Allen, Director of the Service's Pacific Region. "Other salmonid populations in the basin would also benefit, as would the terns."

For every acre of tern nesting habitat eliminated on East Sand Island, the tern management plan calls for two acres to be created or enhanced at alternate sites along the Pacific Coast and in interior Oregon. Creation or

enhancement of alternate sites would be completed by 2010. Tern nesting habitat on East Sand Island will not be reduced until nesting habitat at alternate sites is created or enhanced.

In all, about 8 acres of nesting habitat will be created or enhanced elsewhere and 1 to 1.5 acres will be maintained on East Sand Island. Based on the average number of nesting pairs – approximately 9,175 in the Columbia River estuary for 2000 through 2004 – about 6,000 to 6,675 breeding pairs will be dispersed to alternate sites while about 2,500 to 3,125 breeding pairs would continue to use East Sand Island.

The redistribution project is expected to cost $2,422,093 in first-year construction and habitat enhancement costs. Monitoring costs will range from $100,000 to $269,000 a year, depending on alternate site development and tern nesting activity.

All of the alternate sites are on public land and most already have some terns nesting. The sites are:

Washington:

Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge in Clallam County, 1 acre

Oregon:

Crump Lake in Lake County, 1 acre

Summer Lake Wildlife Area in Lake County, 1.5 acres

Fern Ridge Lake in Lane County, 1 acre

California:

Brooks Island, Central San Francisco Bay, Contra Costa County, 2 acres

Hayward Regional Shoreline, Alameda County, 0.5 acre

Don Edwards/San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Alameda County, 0.5 to 1 acre

Based on experience and the history of this species pioneering new nesting locations throughout the Pacific Region, biologists believe the terns will be attracted to the new nesting habitat as it becomes available and existing nesting habitat on East Sand Island is reduced. In some areas, decoys and recordings will be used to lure terns to the alternate sites. These strategies have succeeded in the past.

In 1999 and 2000, in a project led by the Corps of Engineers, the Caspian terns were relocated to East Sand Island from Rice Island, 15 miles up the Columbia River using the same strategies. While nesting on Rice Island, the terns' diet consisted almost entirely of steelhead and salmon. On East Sand Island, near the mouth of Columbia River, the terns' diet shifted to mostly marine fish, such as anchovies. The number of young salmon and steelhead eaten by terns dropped by 52 percent. However, NOAA Fisheries scientists believe the large East Sand Island tern colony is still negatively affecting Columbia River salmon recovery because the number of smolts eaten by terns is substantial and is expected to increase as predicted poor ocean conditions result in fewer marine fish for the terns to eat.

Biologists estimate the goals of the tern redistribution effort will be met by 2010. Timing of actions at specific alternate sites will phased in, depending on available funding for habitat enhancement.

“Caspian terns are long-lived birds, opportunistic and very mobile, adapting well to habitat loss and gain,” Regional Director Allen said. “Thus we expect displaced terns from East Sand Island to find nesting habitat at managed alternate sites and possibly elsewhere in the region.”

The tern management plan was developed as part of a 2002 lawsuit settlement agreement between the Service and the Corps and the National Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife, Seattle Audubon Society and the American Bird Conservancy. In the settlement agreement, the agencies agreed to maintain six acres of habitat on East Sand Island near the mouth of the Columbia River until 2005, complete three studies and prepare a tern management plan and EIS for implementation in 2005.

The Caspian tern is a fish-eating bird that occurs worldwide and is native to the Pacific Northwest. The East Sand Island colony near the mouth of the Columbia River is the world's largest, with more than 9,000 pairs. Nesting by Caspian terns in the Columbia River estuary has grown significantly since it was first documented in 1984. Caspian terns have concentrated in the estuary because historic nesting sites have been lost elsewhere in the Pacific Coast/Western region and human-created dredge-spoil islands in the estuary offered stable nesting habitat close to abundant supplies of fish. Caspian terns typically nest in relatively small numbers (e.g., 100-1,500 pairs) on islands along the coast and interior lakes. The concentration of about 70 percent of the regional tern population is an atypical occurrence for this species.

A notice of availability of the tern management plan/EIS was published in today's Federal Register. The complete plan and related studies can be found at http://migratorybirds.pacific.fws.gov/CATE.htm

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.